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General

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Exch
simon rodia's towers in watts

simon rodia's

COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

towers in watts

sponsored by the contemporary art council
and the committee for
simon rodia's towers in watts.

los angeles county museum of art 1962

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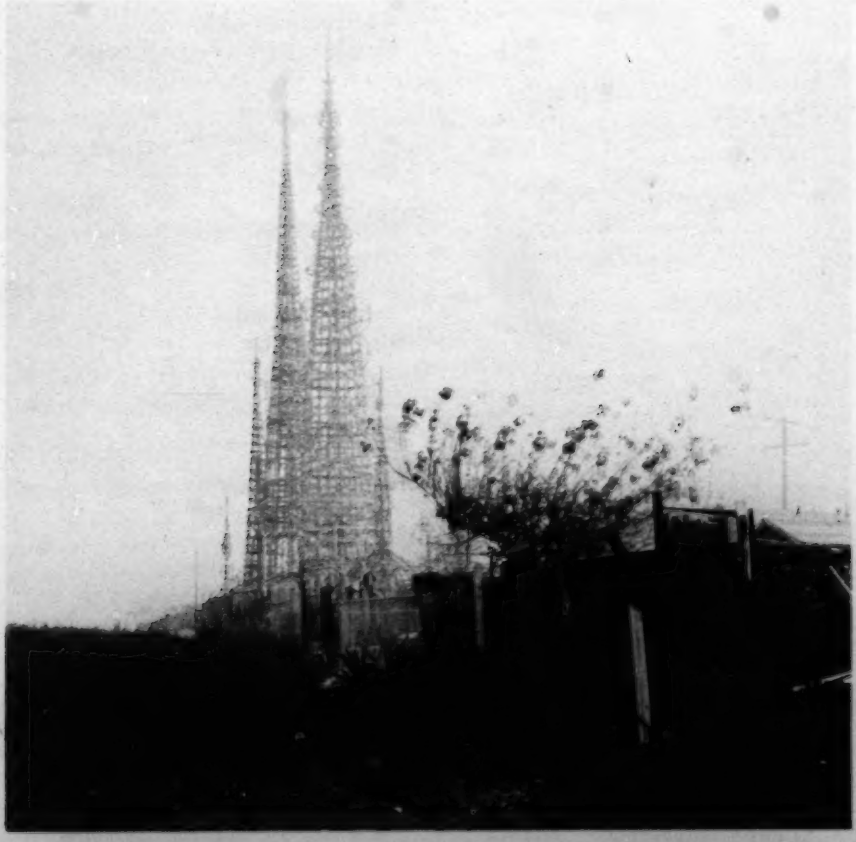
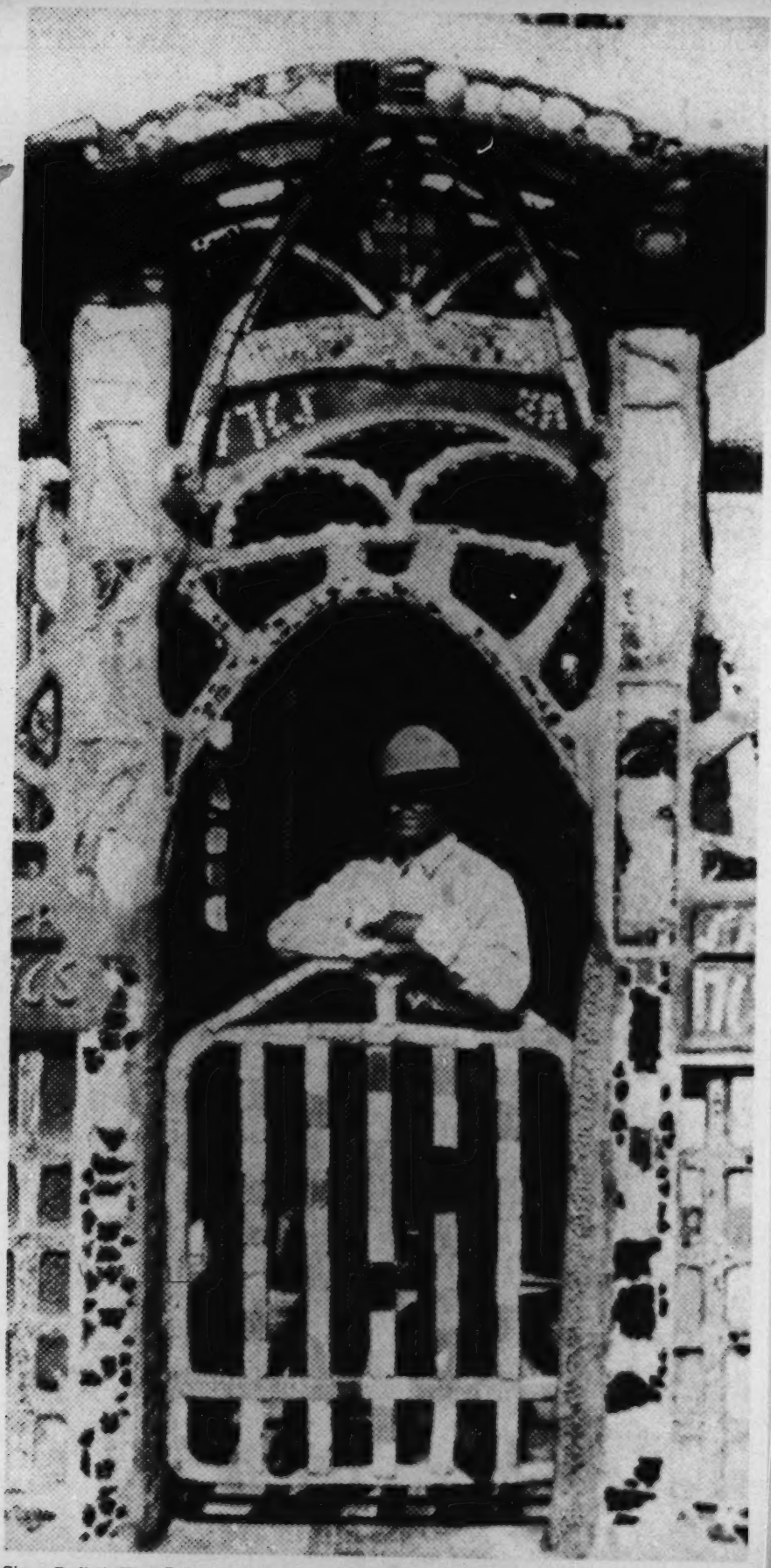


From the West

foreword

Simon Rodia's Towers excite the interest of all who see or know of them. People wonder about the man and why and how he built them. More sophisticated visitors, who may not ask these questions, are often more impressed than those who seek easy answers. ¶ The contradictions of the Towers; these fantastic, glittering, lacelike structures rising from their prosaic neighborhood, this lyric statement by a practicing skilled laborer who lacked any formal artistic training, this artistic order created from the rubbish and litter of society, command wonder and respect from any sensitive observer. ¶ Though the Towers have received recognition through a film and publication abroad and elsewhere in this country, this is the first exhibition devoted to them. It has been made possible by the efforts and interest of more people than can be acknowledged here but particular thanks are due to the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts and the Contemporary Art Council for their sponsorship, to Professor Paul Laporte for his essay on Simon, the Towers and their recent history, to Mrs. Kate Steinitz whose archives, the result of years of devoted labor, will continue to be a primary source for all interested in the Towers, to Miss Clare Bian for her scholarly work on the Towers, to Seymour Rosen whose sensitive photographs reveal many subtle aspects of the Towers to an increasing audience, and to John Espinoza for his imaginative installation of the exhibition. ¶ The Towers themselves are located about two miles East of the Harbor Freeway in the community of Watts at 1765 East 107 Street, and may be visited daily.

WILLIAM OSMUN

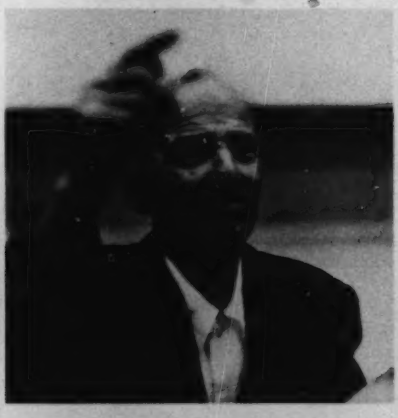


Simon Rodia in Watts (photograph from WHEN *magazine, Los Angeles, March 1947)*

the man

Simon Rodia is a slight man with a large head and big, gnarled hands. When he uses a tool his hands become tender and loving. There is a complete dedication to the task at hand and nothing beyond seems to exist. He is inconspicuous in his shaggy work clothes, or conspicuous only in a society where the line between laborer and white collar worker has faded. Simon's eyes are alert, shifting from keen observation to broad friendliness; his prominent nose announces an obstinate thinker. Talking, he is not only obstinate but also solitary. His thoughts go meandering in their own way; he is hardly touched by questions or contradictions. A cantankerous old man — much like Michaelangelo in his letters — he likes to complain about taxes and prices, about women painted and in pants, about drinking parents who use foul language and corrupt the younger generation. But there is also Columbus and Marconi and Marco Polo, the Egyptians and Rome and Luther and Julius Caesar. And there is this rock of a sentence: "I was going to do something big, and I did." ¶ It has been thought that his learning came from the Encyclopaedia Britannica which he owned, even though there is a suspicion that he may not have known how to read. It is known that he attended meetings of the Italo-American society. His information, much like his work, is a collection of bits and pieces which he fitted into pretty patterns. What it lacks in accuracy is made up by imagination. ¶ Simon (his real name

may have been Sabatino) was born in Italy near Naples, around 1880. His father borrowed money to send Simon's older brother to the United States. Simon, still at a very young age, followed his brother shortly after. Little is known for certain about Simon's life in the United States until 1921, when he started work on the Towers. But putting the often contradictory fragments of information together, one visualizes a rebellious and proud man who, in the first half of his life, ran aground with women and alcohol. A tremendous emotional pressure must have been bottled up in him, released finally in a peculiar urgency and obsession. This physically and mentally tough peasant set out on a long, long voyage of humble dedication, severe discipline and grinding routine. A self-destructive tendency was converted into creative construction. His sense of self-reliance comes out in the item on the generals which he acts out with his characteristic mimic expressiveness. There were only three generals according to him: Alexander, Hannibal and Caesar. They went ahead of their troops; all the others, they had their feet on the desk. ¶ When he began work on the Towers, Simon was around forty and earned his living as a tile setter. From this moment on his life was solitary and he dedicated himself completely to the Towers. Simon worked on the Towers for 33 years, from 1921 to 1954. All the money he could save was used to acquire cement and steel; all his spare time went into the work on the Towers and into trips to collect shells, broken tiles and bottles for his mosaic incrustations. By 1954, now way in his seventies, Simon became tired. It is said he was disappointed because of opposition and lack of interest in his work. He felt that he had done enough and that the Towers were practically finished. He went to Martinez near Berkeley in Northern California where he had some relatives, a nephew and a brother-in-law. But he was as proud as ever and preferred living by himself on beans to becoming dependent on the charity of his relations. Now, in the spring of 1962, as he walks the streets of Martinez, the lonely man is well known to the townspeople. When you address him on the street he may hold forth for hours on end, complaining about the bad course of the world and mumbling something about Columbus who, after his great accomplishment, ended up in chains. Even though he did appear – well shaven, in a clean dark suit and white shirt – before a group at the University of California in Berkeley, where he was given a standing ovation, the Towers are a thing of the past for Simon Rodia.



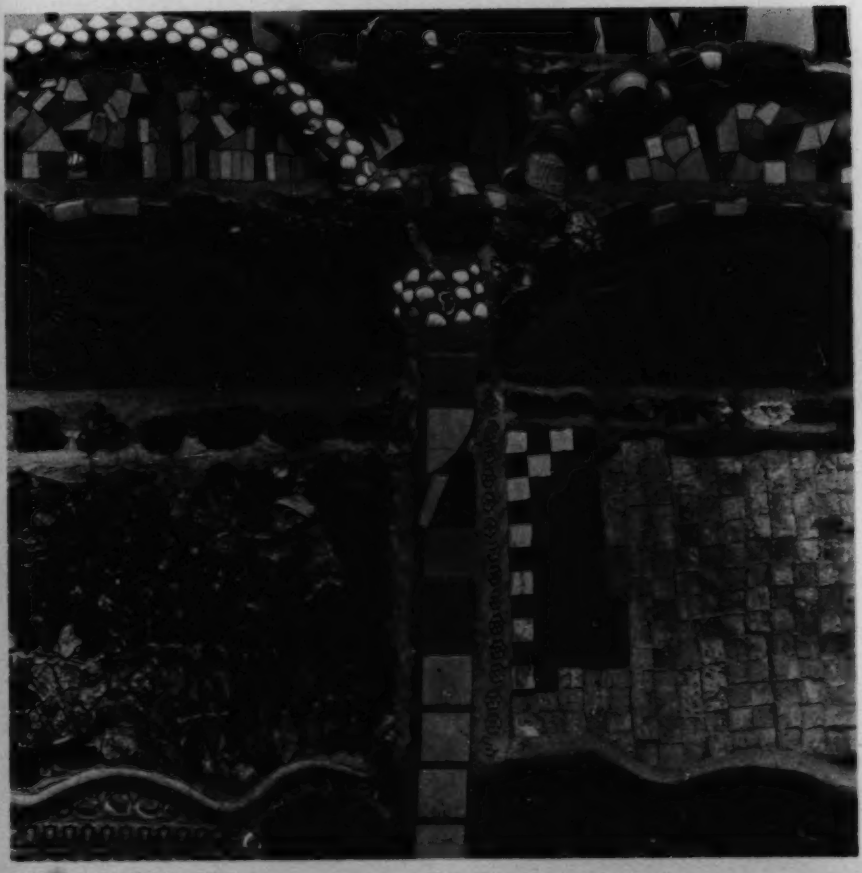
Simon Rodia in Martinez and Berkeley, 1961

Detail, South wall

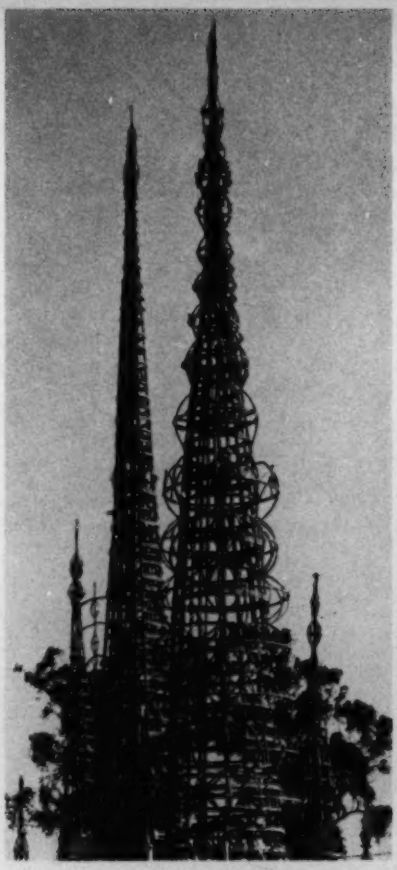
The entrance, toward the West end of the South wall

What makes the Towers "tick"? What made the man tick who made the Towers? How did he achieve his task singlehandedly? Once one has surrendered to the serenity and beauty of the Towers, and absorbed the shock of their singularity, he may emerge with these questions. ¶ Asked whether he had any help in making the Towers, Simon answers: "I could not afford any help and I would not have known what to tell him; most of the time I did not know what to do myself." Here is one secret of his creativeness. There is no preconceived plan, no calculation, only an immediate response to the needs of the moment. — The other secret of his single-minded creativity may very well be the fracture of his life between the disorderly rebelliousness of his first forty years and a deep longing for a lasting order. Simon expresses this in the simple urgency of one sentence thrice repeated: "I was going to do something. I was going to do something. I was going to do something." Spoken in crescendo and ending in something like a shout. ¶ But what makes the Towers tick? I believe it is their organic quality. As in nature there is a reason for everything, and there is nothing without a reason. The layout with the arcaded walls around was determined by the odd, triangular shape of the lot. The lacework of the towers was determined by the need of one man creating a tall structure without the aid of scaffolding, doing all the work alone. It was the very design of the spires which provided the scaffolding as Simon went on building. Like in a tree that adds rings as the years go by and it grows taller, so Simon created two layers of vertical supports reinforced with horizontal rings around the cores of the spires, making

Section of the South wall



Section of the South wall

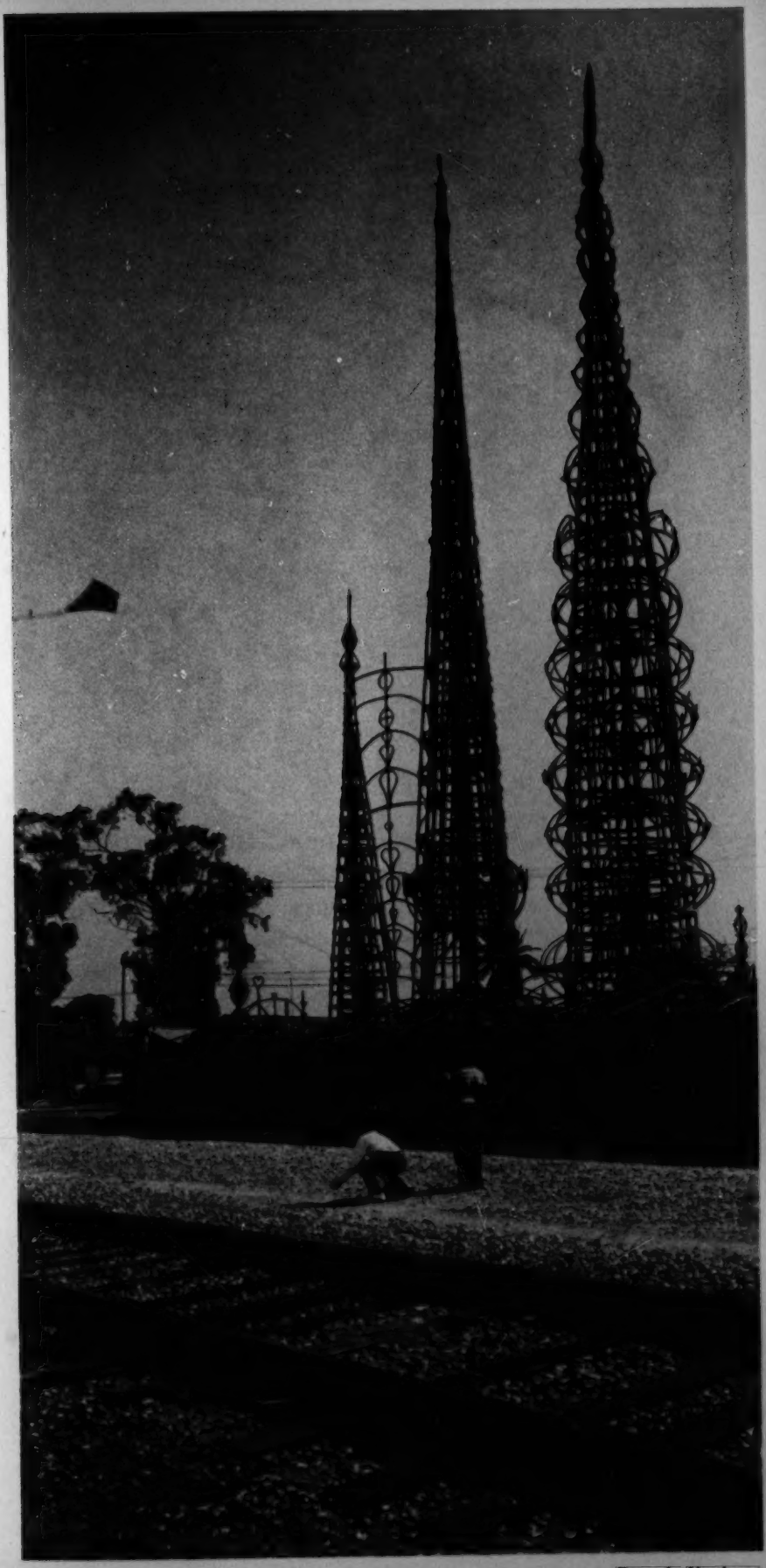


From the Northwest

The "Fountain"

A "Stalagmite" group, also called the "Cactus Garden"

them wider at the base and allowing him to add to their height. And always the solitary man climbing down to refill his little pail with cement, and climbing up again to add at the top. Thus he finally reached the great height of almost one hundred feet in the central tower. ¶ The laciness of the spires with their center columns, rings and spokes is effected by steel beams, alternating between T beams and angles, and steel bars which he bent by inserting them under the close-by railroad tracks. From the smaller and larger spires and towers spokes are reaching out in all directions, reinforcing the vertical part and at the same time giving an arbor-like effect. All the metal parts are covered with cement over chicken wire. The joints are neither bolted nor riveted; they are held together with cement over wire. Not even the colorful incrustation is merely an amenity; it creates a protective shell over the reinforced cement. Thus every part and combination of parts in these structures is a technical necessity while at the same time emerging as the character and beauty of the whole. ¶ Nor is it only medium and technique which give organic quality to these structures. The Towers could not be what they are, these materials and techniques could not be used, in any climate other than that of Southern California. Greater humidity and cold would be their ruin. And this brings us back once more to the man who created the Towers, who came from Southern Italy with its similar climate,

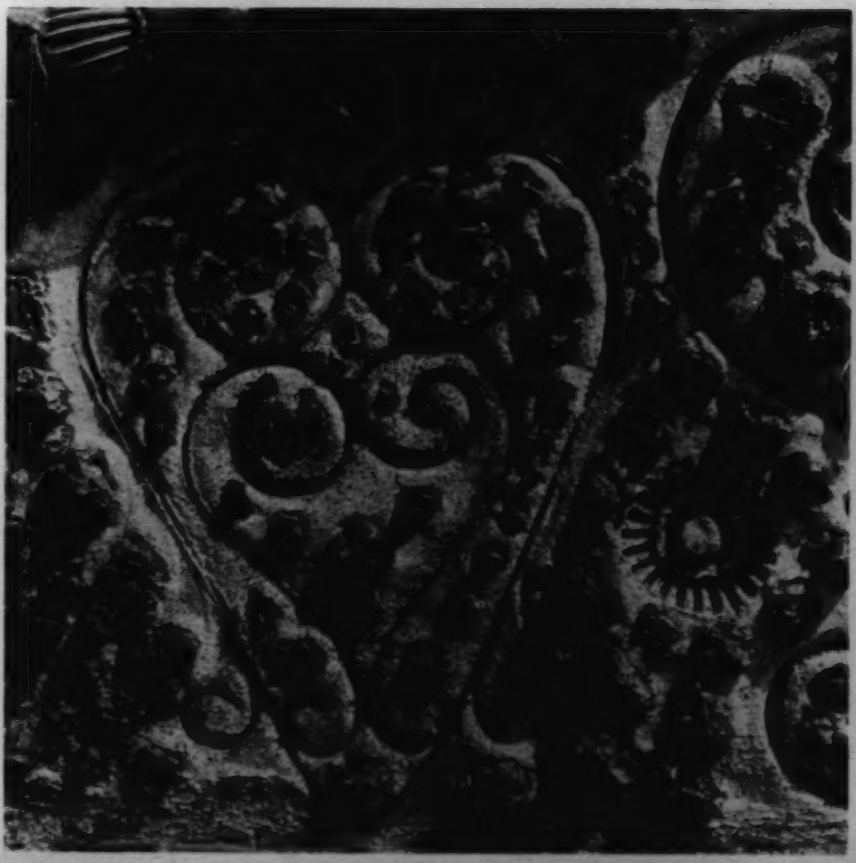


From the Northwest

who, from his early childhood, was predisposed for just such a climate. Moreover, his experience as a tile setter in California, where tiles were used traditionally since Spanish Colonial times, gave a solid mechanical base to his enterprise. Beyond this, however, one must not forget that the bending and weaving and tieing together into the strong lacework of this magic garden was all Simon's very own invention, completely without precedent. ¶ And then there are, growing through and over the presiding symmetries of these organic structures, the variations and irregularities. The ship of Marco Polo (perhaps the first part constructed after the wall), located at the narrow end of the pointed, triangular lot; the three main towers, majestic in spite of their transparent lightness; the fountain, the arbor, the benches, the groups of stalagmites, and the stately gallery of broken mirrors and trinkets leading from the garden door to the entrance of the house. The greater formality around the house is contrasted to the freer treatment of the other parts. Areas of cement with molded and impressed designs are contrasted to those encrusted with shards in a burst of color, or with textures, like those of the stalagmites covered with crushed glass, of the arches encrusted with white shells, or of those flat areas covered with the round bases of green bottles. Just as there is an unerring sense for organic structure, there is also an unerring sense for color. The many-colored brightness of broken fayence tiles, rescued from the dump piles, is reassembled in an haphazard and yet deliberate tumble unfailing in the distribution of colors and shapes. A lowly material has been transfigured, new life has been created

from what had been discarded by an affluent community. ¶ And while no climate but California's would tolerate the Towers, it needs the sun of Southern California to bring their sparkling colors to life. To consider the Towers as folk art is befitting only in part. They are indeed folk art because they were made by an untutored artist. But unlike other folk artists Simon had no established examples to work from, no guidance but his own inventiveness. His structures may have a vague resemblance to Gothic spires, but the way he put them up is entirely his own. The colorful incrustations of the surfaces are indeed similar to those that the Spanish architect Gaudi invented at the beginning of this century. But it is unlikely that Simon ever saw these works, and one must conclude that not only his particular use of reinforced concrete but also of mosaic incrustations was spontaneous. ¶ The utter uniqueness and singularity of Simon's monument is uncontested. There is only one other humble man, the French mailcarrier Bernard Cheval, who, like Simon, spent 33 years in building his structures. He said of himself what Simon Rodia might have said also: "Let a man more obstinate than me attempt such work." *(Plus opinatre che moi se mette a l'oeuvre)* Simon Rodia, instead, left the imprints of his humble tools on his walls, like those Neolithic people who engraved drawings of their tools into the rocks. His mysterious inscription, NUESTRO PUEBLO, points to his sojourn in Mexico, to his Mexican neighbors in Watts, and to his devotion for his adopted land. But most of all NUESTRO PUEBLO is the solitary village of cheerfulness dreamed up from the long past memories of a lonely man.

The East end of the South wall



Detail, South wall

A panel of the South wall

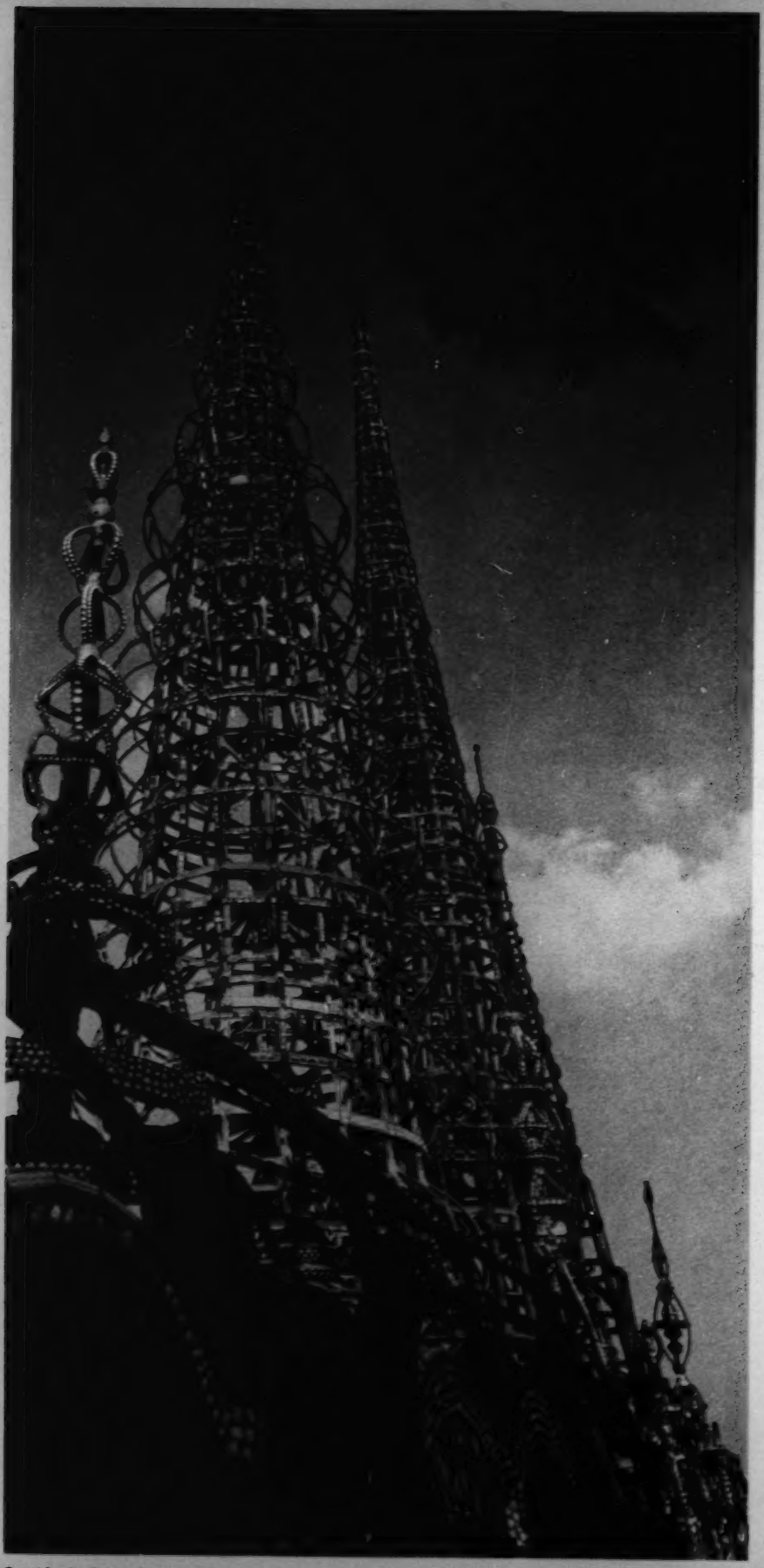
A panel of the South wall

"The Ship of Marco Polo" at the East end

Base of panel in the South wall

Detail, "The Ship of Marco Polo," at the East end

The "Gazebo"

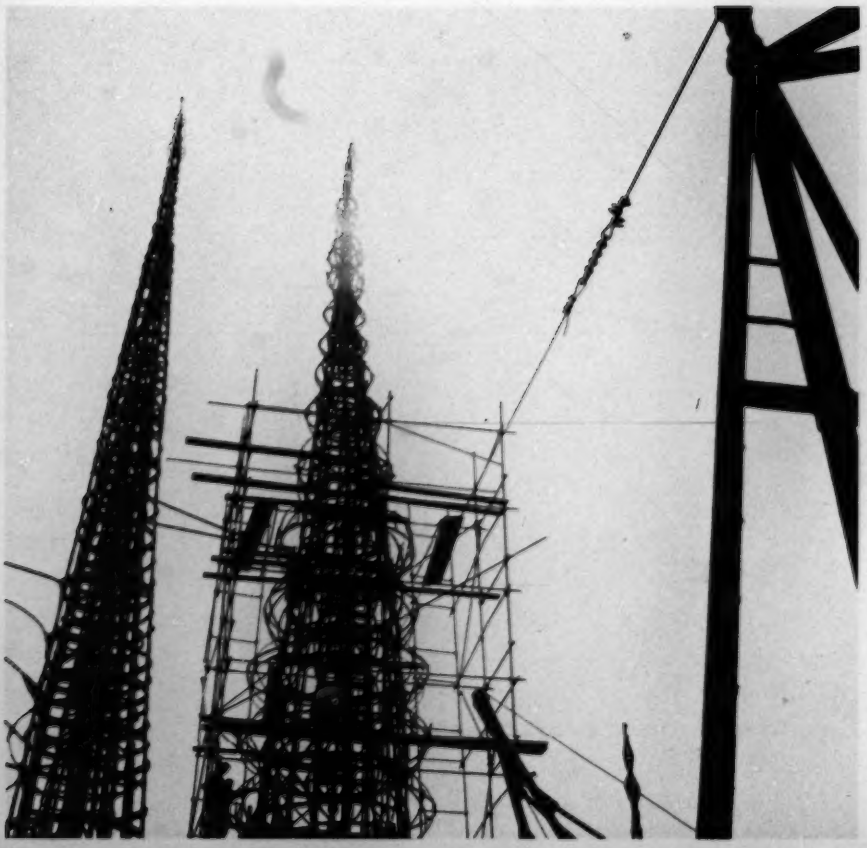


Outside the South wall looking East

A "Stalagmite" group inside the South wall

The "Gazebo"

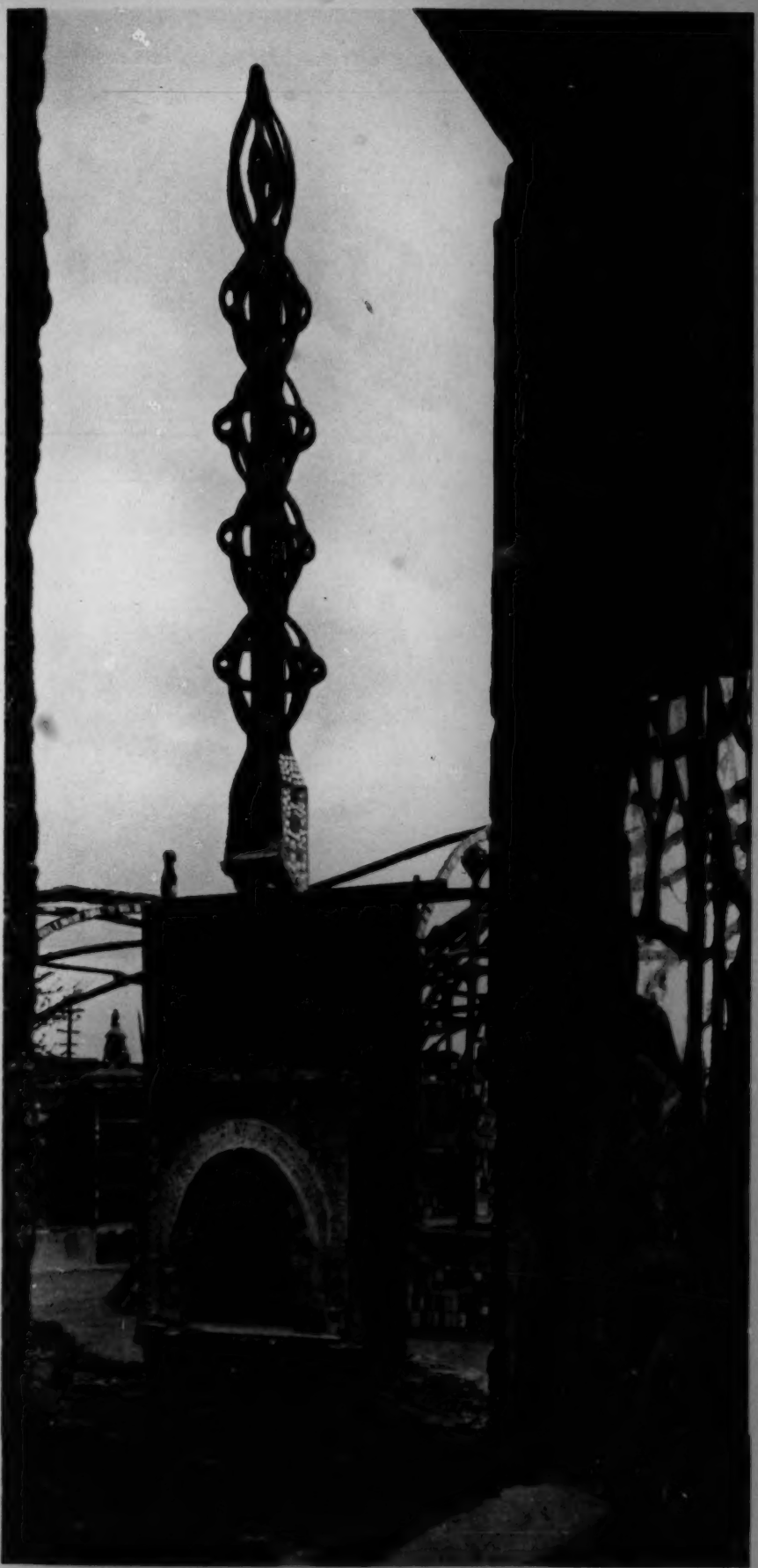
A detail of the South wall



Simon worked on the Towers for 33 years, from 1921 to 1954. In 1952 William Hale took a motion picture of the Towers, of Simon at work, of Simon holding forth on his ideas, of his neighbors' reactions to Simon's work. This film is an important record and at the same time good entertainment. ¶ In 1955, only a year after he had left for Martinez, the old home by the Towers burned down, possibly as a result of vandalism. In 1957, the City's Department of Building and Safety ordered the demolition of the Towers because they might be dangerous to public safety. By 1959 two courageous young men, the film editor William Cartwright and the actor Nicholas King, had acquired the Towers which they hoped to save for the public benefit. ¶ THE COMMITTEE FOR SIMON RODIA'S TOWERS IN WATTS was formed in 1959, and later incorporated as a non-profit organization. Its aim is to carry out a program of preservation and maintenance of the Towers, and to establish the tower area as some kind of cultural center. ¶ In the spring of 1959 hearings began before the Department of Building and Safety. The Towers Committee was ably represented by its legal counsel Jack Levine, by the architect Edward Farrell and by engineer N. J. Bud Goldstone. There was a difference in the safety margins worked out by the City Department and by Goldstone respectively. The former based its calculations for allowable stresses on steel and combination columns while Goldstone used values for reinforced concrete. Finally, a compromise was worked out according to which the tallest tower would be subjected to a 10,000 pound load test, to be conducted by engineer Goldstone and at the Committee's expense. ¶ The

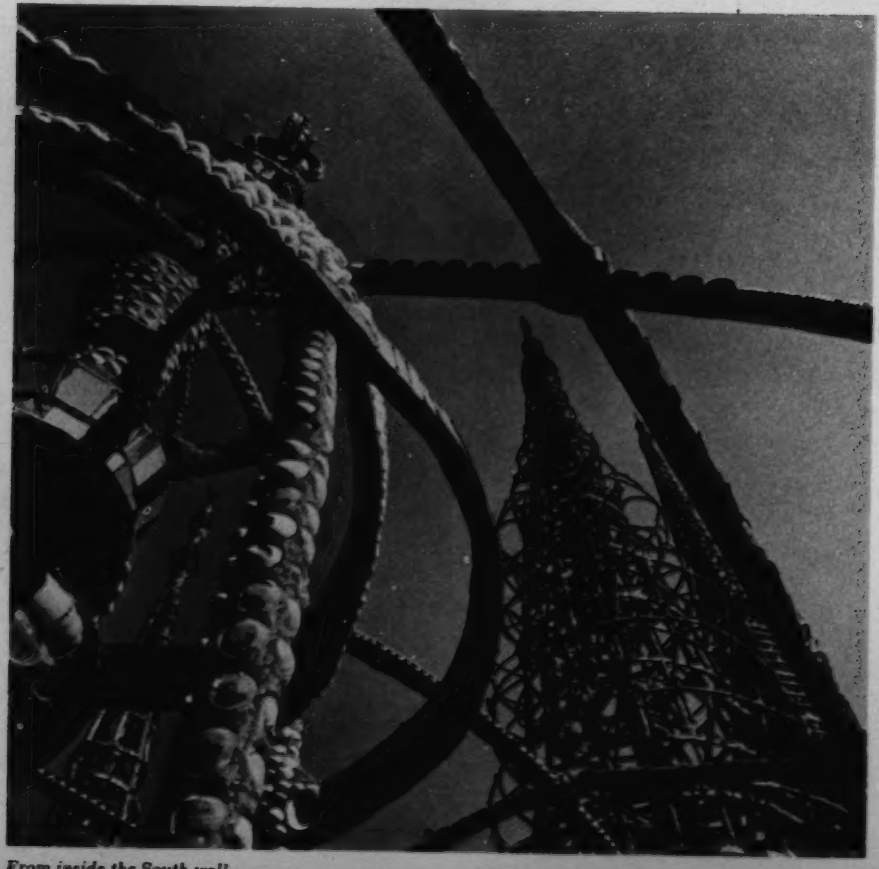
dramatic test took place on October 10, 1959. The 10,000 pound load was applied by a hand-pumped hydraulic jack. When the load ran up to its maximum of 10,000 pounds the deflection of the tower was minimal, but the main beam of the test rigging through which the whole load was applied to the tower began to give. Thus, the maximum load was applied only for one minute instead of the stipulated five minutes. But the representative of the Building Department was satisfied that this test was sufficient proof of the safety of the Towers. ¶ This test demonstrated the astounding resourcefulness and intuition which guided Simon in the construction of the Towers. Even though they reach only 14 inches into the ground, they are so redundant and well connected that the heavy load applied to them (much heavier than could ever be expected under natural circumstances of wind or earthquake) had no ill effect. It is very likely that a more conventional structure would not have stood up so easily under such a severe test. ¶ Once the immediate danger of demolition was removed, the Committee dedicated itself to raising the money for the test and for the acquisition of the Towers. This was accomplished during the short period of two years by donations, fund raising campaigns and entrance fees to the Towers. The income from the entrance fees is a small but steady revenue. But there were days when the number of visitors rose to over a thousand. ¶ In the summer of 1961 the Committee initiated its first cultural activity. Free art classes for neighborhood children were offered on the premises of the Towers. This activity was so well received that it will be continued in the summer of 1962. ¶ It is the intention of the Committee to create a cultural center around the Towers. Plans for redevelopment have been drawn up by architect Ed Farrell in consultation with a special committee. But great financial problems must still be resolved before this next step in the work for the Towers of Simon Rodia can be taken.

PAUL LAPORTE, *Immaculate Heart College, Los Angeles, California*

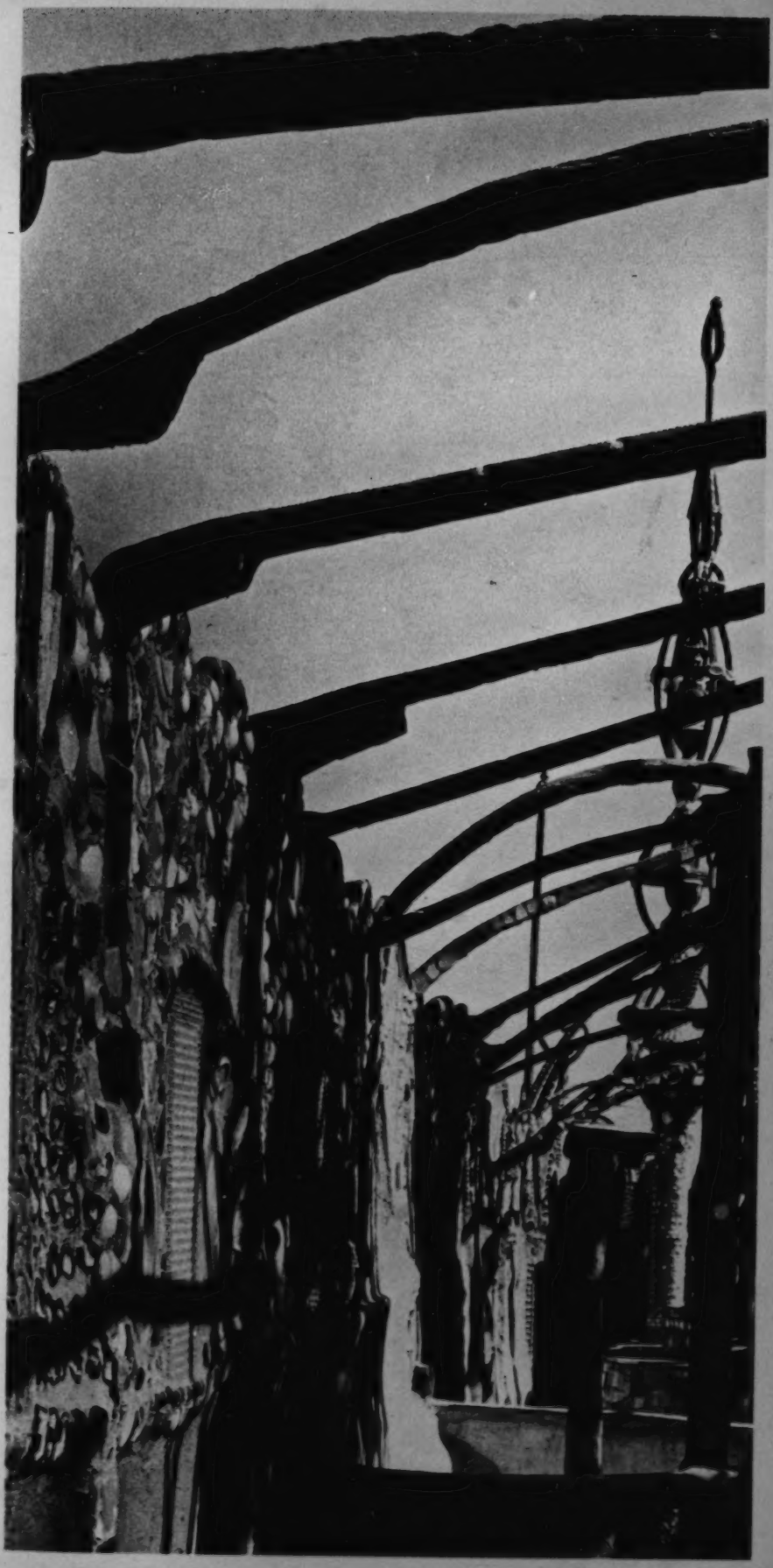


Inside the South entrance looking Northeast through what was once a window of Simon Rodia's house. All that remains is this wall and the fireplace.

Looking up inside the westernmost of the three tallest towers



From inside the South wall



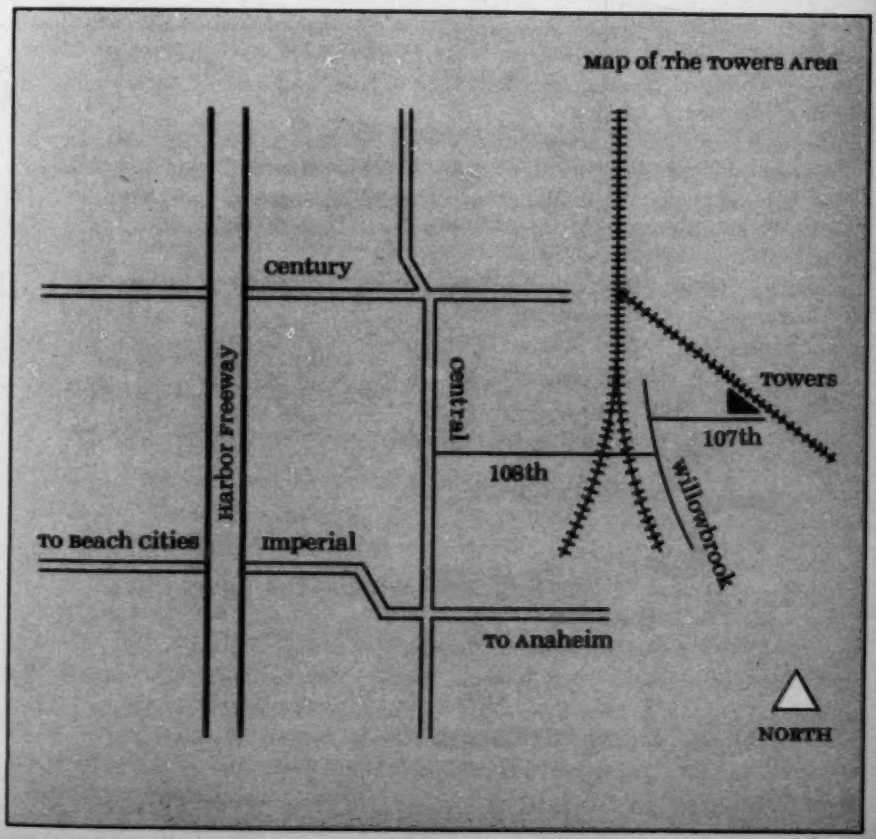
Inside the North wall looking East

From the Southeast

Outside the entrance at the West end of the North wall looking South to the "Gazebo"

From the Southwest

Watts


Map of The Towers Area
century
Harbor Freeway
central
TOWERS
107th
108th
willowbrook
TO Beach cities
imperial
TO Anaheim
NORTH

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